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Webster's View of Soviet Future: Doom and Gloom

■ **Intelligence:** The retiring CIA chief says it may already be too late for Gorbachev and his reforms.

By ROBIN WRIGHT
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LANGLEY, Va.—As the United States and its Western allies ponder the issue of providing major aid to the Soviet Union, outgoing CIA Director William H. Webster said Thursday that Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev may not be able to prevent his nation's disintegration or the collapse of its economy.

Webster described Gorbachev's future as "increasingly uncertain" despite a recent shift back to a reform agenda.

"The question is: Is it too late? Moses didn't get to the promised land, and this may be the case with Gorbachev," he said.

Webster's assessment, made during a wide-ranging interview with reporters before his retirement, provides a grim counterpoint to the Bush Administration's official assurances that it supports the Soviet reform effort and might be willing to assist a workable program.

In contrast to the Soviet leader's increasingly shaky position, Webster said President Saddam Hussein is "currently very much in charge" in Iraq and moving swiftly

to begin rebuilding his nation's war-ravaged infrastructure.

He advocated continued reliance on international sanctions against Iraq as the best means of encouraging Hussein's ouster.

Webster expressed "cautious optimism" about Iran's pronouncements this week on rapprochement with the outside world and about the prospects for release of six American and five other foreign hostages in Lebanon.

Webster, a former federal judge and FBI director, announced his retirement this month after four years as director of the Central Intelligence Agency. President Bush has nominated Robert M. Gates, deputy White House national security adviser, to be his successor. Webster is expected to step down formally after confirmation hearings for Gates, now set for June.

Speaking with reporters over breakfast at CIA headquarters, Webster predicted that the map of the Soviet Union could be redrawn by the end of the year as a result of separatist movements in non-Russian republics. He predicted that five or six of the 15 republics could complete the process of secession in coming months.

Webster said Gorbachev is losing his hold on the country because "he unleashed a set of forces that went beyond his own vision." He said the Soviet leader may be able to hang onto power only because more independent leaders, such as Russian Federation President Boris N. Yeltsin, prefer a weakened central government so that the republics can pursue their own goals.

Concern about internal instability already has led Soviet officials to relocate or better protect their nation's nuclear arsenal and other weapons of mass destruction to prevent them from falling into "unfriendly hands that might precipitate problems," Webster said.

"We see them paying more attention to this in ways that would suggest they're not as confident as in the past," he said. "This is an area we're going to have to watch very carefully to make sure that we're secure against that threat."

Meanwhile, Webster expressed disappointment with recent setbacks in U.S. drug-fighting efforts, citing in particular an "erosion of will" in Colombia. He said the cocaine-producing nation has become increasingly reluctant to protect judges who try drug lords and has failed to follow through on extradition of suspects to the United States.

Webster also said that the CIA now has "more than a circumstantial case" on who was responsible for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, although he declined to disclose details.